

Epilogue (or maybe Interlogue)

Five years have passed since I wrote my essay about the origin story of applied math at Auburn, on the occasion of Georg's 75th birthday. Time to contemplate what has changed since then.

Five years! Remember the famous Parker-Allison constant? "Five years from now." That's when the math department would get a new building. Five years from now. Always. Well, I hear they just abandoned Parker Hall and moved into a new "STEM and Agricultural Sciences Complex." Lo and behold! Unbelievable! So much for the laws of physics...

Well, people, maybe it's fake news. I just checked the department website. Says there that the department is housed in Parker Hall. Checked also the AU homepage. Something called "STEM-Ag Complex" is listed on the "Building Info Portal," but the only info provided is an address. The "Building Directory" of the official campus map does not even acknowledge the existence of a "STEM-Ag Complex." So, people, I reserve final judgement for now. I'll believe it when I see it.

Also, according to the department website, Ash is still chair. But on the faculty-and-staff page, it says he's interim dean of the graduate school. I'm a bit confused. Just kidding. Ash became chair after my own stint in 2019, then moved on to the graduate school. Bravo! Then Nedret became interim chair, and she still is. Brava! And just a few days ago, Dean Thomas announced that Junshan would be the next chair, starting in January. I wish you all the best, Junshan, and in particular the strength you will need to succeed and survive—the strength I failed to muster seven years ago, despite all the help I got from my friends.

So, Junshan will be the next chair? How's that even possible? He was a kid when he came to Auburn! And that happened just a few years ago, right? Well, I guess it depends on the definition of "a few." When I congratulated him on his appointment, Junshan wrote back: "You may not believe that currently I am older than most faculty in the department." Indeed, I can't believe that. If Junshan is now a senior citizen, what does that make A. J. and me? Not to mention Georg...

Fact is, the face of the department has changed a whole lot over the past seven years. Many young people were hired after I retired and moved away.¹

¹I hear that Yuming Zhang, who goes by Paul, is my successor not only in name. The applied math seminar won't start until Paul walks in, always right on time. That's exactly how it was during my time as Paul. Except I was always five minutes late. (Here's another universal constant: "five minutes." Paul—*this* Paul—is five minutes late. Always. Just ask my friends in Bari...)

I know their names, even their faces, from the mugshots on the faculty-and-staff page. I know a bit about what they are doing, and from the occasional great-news email, I know they are doing it very well. Bravi! But I've never met them. And I may never meet them, unless they come to Italy or visit some other civilized country. Because I can't go to Auburn. You see, given my history of irreverent and at times vitriolic comments on the current administration, I'm pretty sure my name is on a blacklist of people who aren't welcome in the US. (I just hope they won't cut my pension. I'd really be up shit creek if they did...)

So, what's the outlook for applied math at Auburn today? — Phenomenal, I'd say! Going strong and growing stronger. Let's remember the origin story: Georg was hired to build an applied math group in what was then FAT, the Department of Foundations, Analysis and Topology. Then came yours truly, then A. J., and then, quite a few years later, Wenxian. And, for a long, long time, that was all. But look at us now!

I think it's fair to say that applied math is thriving at Auburn. So, the plan worked out, if not quite the way its engineers intended. Remember that the engineers of the plan were the Texas topologists and their friends, worried about their survival in the fight against ACA, the Department of Algebra, Combinatorics and Analysis. While their mathematical philosophy appears to have been relegated to the dust bin of history, we should honor their memory: without them, we wouldn't be where we are. (Forgive me for using the first person plural in talking about the applied math group at Auburn. While I left Auburn many years ago, I still feel part of the group and part of its legacy.)

Other things didn't work out. Near the end of my original essay, I talked about Selim, who had just been hired, and his advisor, Yuri Latushkin. And I wrote: "Selim and Yuri, I wish that, by the time this essay appears in print, there will be peace in your country." As I am writing this epilogue/interlogue, I hear that Russia has launched its second major attack on Kyiv in less than a week. At least twelve people died in the attack, in addition to the thirty-one who perished in last week's assault. So much for my wish. The world at large is a horrible mess, today even more so than four years ago. I read the New York Times every morning, and more often than not I end up with a stomach ache.²

²Even at Auburn, not everything is cool and dandy. I hear that the BOT abolished the faculty senate. What? — I fondly remember the days when I was a senator, and we were fighting the BOT tooth and nail. We wouldn't let them get away with anything. We censured them, as well as the president. Looks like they finally got the upper hand after Herb Rotfeld died...

But in the face of so much evil, we must cherish the good. And there's so much good to cherish, at Auburn and elsewhere! On the forty-year anniversary of Georg's arrival in Auburn, I wish y'all continued success and the happiness that success can entail. And, mi raccomando: support Junshan in his new endeavor! He needs and deserves your help! And don't forget Georg and his legacy! And stay loyal to the Queen!

Rereading the last paragraph of my essay, I discovered a new universal constant (forget about Parker-Allison). The new constant, "forever," is called the Wenxian constant. Wenxian will forever be our queen. Retirement—should she ever retire—won't change that. Queens are not subject to term limits.